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School self-evaluation: The case of Greece examined through the views of preschool education teachers

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Abstract: *The present research aimed at investigating the perceptions of pre-school teachers concerning the institution of school self-evaluation in Greece. More specifically, the semi-structured interview tool was meticulously implemented, in order for teachers' views to be thoroughly explored in a concrete spatial, temporal and social context. This method managed to examine effectively the preschool teachers' views, along with the variables and the experiences that affect them. In terms of questionnaires' method, open-ended questions were used. The material collected from the responses was subdivided into conceptual subsections and then coded into functional definitions. The processing indicated, that the majority of the participants believed, that self-evaluation should be considered particularly important and that it should be characterized by a set of key elements such as: clear purposes, responsible and organized execution, as well as objectivity of judgments. Participants also claimed, that sloppiness, fear, and insecurity, along with lack of organization and information may lead to procedure failure.*

Keywords: school self-evaluation, preschool education, teachers' perceptions.

JEL Classification: I21

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the teachers' role is essentially crucial for improving the education provided. According to the OECD, improving teachers' performance can have significant benefits for students' learning (OECD, 2005). Also, in the present period, self-evaluation of schools constitutes a central part of their efforts to improve themselves in many educational systems. Self-evaluation gives an opportunity to the school unit to become aware of itself, to realize school life areas where good work is done, to point out others, which need improvement and to enhance the teachers' professional development (i.e., Theofilidis, 2014: 42-43, 53-82). In addition, self-evaluation institution is a reform effort, an innovation aimed at improving the school unit (i.e., Dieronitou, Sofou, 2015:61). In the same direction, the Hellenic Ministry of Education and the Institute of Educational Policy in the "Self-Evaluation at a Glance 2013-2014", considers it a continuous dynamic process integrated into school functioning. This process includes the assessment of the school's current state. Chapman also claims, that it should be shaped by the schools themselves and incorporated

into the usual management systems (i.e., Chapman, 2008: 403-420). Finally, the development of self-assessment strategies has led to effective, intelligent schools (Macgilchrist et al, 2004).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children in the United States describes the key points of quality in the form of various self-evaluation factors, concerning various educational factors (NAYEC, 2009). These factors are: a) teachers ,their inter-relationships and professional training, their lifelong development and commitment, their exertion of authority and management of leadership and their assessment of students' progress b) parents and students, along with the respective communities they form c) material elements: building infrastructure, school equipment, and d) general frame. All of these are considered vital for the quality of the operation of each preschool unit within the educational system. Therefore, self-evaluation of a preschool institution is particularly important for the realization of its objectives.

However, beneath the surface of all the above reasons, a number of other factors are involved, complicating the whole process. Such are: the non-transparent and contradictory objectives, whether the control is external or internal, up-

down or bottom-up, or both, the way all these elements interact and the problems and the disputes, which arise through this process (Schratz, 1997).

Furthermore, it is a difficultly measurable process, because, on the one hand, the educational project results are manifested in the long run, and on the other hand, these effects involve human temperament and other unpredictable factors (i.e., Naxakis, 2002:223).

2 PROBLEM FORMULATION – RESEARCH NECESSITY

The reduction of public expenditure and the improvement of civil servants' performance were considered as prerequisite obligations for Greece, when applying the memoranda after 2010. As a result, the reduction of civil servants and their evaluation were considered as strategic reforms of the public sector. However, in the consciousness of teachers, a punitive character was attributed to evaluation, as well as self-evaluation, since they were linked, probably arbitrarily, to the prerequisites of the memorandum for shrinking of public sector's employment through the dismissal of civil servants. As a result, Ministerial Decision No. 30972 / C1 / 2013 required the compulsory application of the school self-evaluation. In addition, Presidential Decree 152/2013 extended compulsory assessment to teachers themselves, at all levels of the educational hierarchy, so as to improve their educational and administrative work.

In 2014, school units were obliged to carry out a self-evaluation process, by the document with the Pr. No. 190089 / Γ1 of the Ministry of Education and to publish it on the Hellenic Observer platform E.E.P. The discussed process has prompted the strong reactions of teachers, expressed through strikes and other protests. Especially, T.F.G. (Teachers Federation of Greece) argued, that the afore-mentioned documents, has been created to act, as a tool for stagnation, suspension and dismissals (T.F. G., 2013).

However, since 2015, the self-assessment process has frozen, but has not been abolished by legislation, while public sector assessment is a prerequisite for the memorandum.

Therefore, it was important to investigate in depth, which practices make self-evaluation positive and fertile and which do not, both in terms of research and bibliography.

By studying the available theory, it is noted, that one of the main features of self-evaluation is its implementation on the school's own initiative. (Kalogirou & Palatos 2008). As Stronge and Tucker (2003) note, the attitudes, perceptions, and views of the parties involved must be known beforehand, in order to secure the efficient application of self-evaluation. So, according to them, effective strategies can be organized for successful promotion of this institution, full understanding of its benefits and effective removing of implementation reactions on behalf of teachers, parents & students.

In addition, international and domestic researches revealed the following: A research by Brejc, Gradišnik, and Koren (2011) showed, that teachers believe, that their personal responsibility plays an important role in the self-evaluation process. Drvodelić and Domović (2016: 47-60) also, investigating the perceptions of pre-school teachers in self-

evaluation of preschool institutions, they concluded, that despite the fact that young teachers are more positive in self-evaluation, the didactic experience is not necessarily associated with educators' attitudes. In 2009, Vanhoof et al. (2009) published a research, the results of which illustrated, that the teachers' views are influenced by the extent of the support they receive and by the degree to which they perceive their school as an area of fundamental learning and knowledge. But, self-evaluation in Greek educational reality is viewed, as a complex issue that raises varied and diametrically opposed reactions, with many reservations by primary school teachers, about how it is applied and the purposes it serves (Zouganeli, Kafetzopoulos, Sofou, Tsafos, 2008). Moreover, in a research carried out in 2014, according to Galariniotis and Kasidou, self-evaluation causes teachers to feel fear and insecurity, because they believe that it will lead them to dismissal and will downgrade them (i.e., Galariniotis, Kasidou 2014:114-126).

Besides, for an evaluation process to be effective, it must ensure teachers consent (i.e., OECD, 2009:23). Therefore, in order to effectively promote it, it is necessary to further detect teachers' views on the mentioned institution and process. Research which explores pre-school teachers' views is relatively limited. As a result, it was considered necessary to conduct a research that would focus on pre-school teachers, working at the Greek Ministry of Education and would only explore their own views, trying to fill this gap. It should be noted, that in the Greek Educational System, pre-school education of children aged 4 to 6 years, belongs to the Ministry of Education.

3 PURPOSE OF RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the research is to investigate the perceptions and the opinions of pre-school education teachers, so as to apply the self-evaluation institution, as a means of improving the school itself, along with children's education and teachers' professional development. Particular emphasis was placed on the separation of correct and incorrect practice relating to self-evaluation. The bibliographic review led to a series of questions, related to the subject of school self-evaluation in pre-school education:

- i. What is the importance of self-evaluation according to the teachers working in preschool education schools?
- ii. What are the traits of a positive and fertile self-evaluation practice and what are the traits of a negative and non-fertile one, according to the teachers?
- iii. What dimensions of the educational process should self-evaluation examine (learning environment, teaching practices, communication with students, parents and the local community, teachers' personal development, cooperation between leaders and teachers, cooperation between teachers and parents, building infrastructure and equipment)?
- iv. What are the problems and challenges associated with implementing the self-evaluation measure?

This research has focused on pre-school teachers working in the Greek Ministry of Education and has exclusively explored their own views. Furthermore, the structure and breadth of the questionnaire included almost all the

parameters, that can be worked out and may provide important information on the implementation of self-evaluation in Greece.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The bibliographic review led the researcher to formulating the following thematic categories for investigation:

- i. On the 1st axis, the researcher wanted to find out if the interviewees participated in the self-evaluation process of school units that took place in 2014 in Greece.
- ii. On the second axis, it was considered that it was necessary to examine, whether the participants were aware of what school self-evaluation was, which were their own views on the significance of this institution and how it could work positively in the educational system.
- iii. On the 3rd axis, the researcher chose to explore the dimensions of self-evaluation based on researches such as Ofsted (2013), Macbeath (2005) and the OBSERVER, E. E. P. . She has reached a series of dimensions of self-evaluation, indicating the following: leadership, administration, quality of work patterns, quality of behavior patterns, school unit relationships with primary school department of education, day-to-day practice, applied classroom practices, managing classroom harmony, the frequency of teachers' absences, relationships between the school and the parents, building infrastructure, equipment supply and school funding.
- iv. In the last part of the interview guide, i.e. the 4th axis, the researcher added questions that investigated the problems and challenges concerning the school self-evaluation.

As the purpose of this research was to investigate participants' perceptions on self-evaluation, the qualitative method was chosen, namely the semi-structured interview with general open-ended questions, with no right or wrong answers. Participants could extend within each answer -as much as needed- without limitations in vocabulary. In addition, questions were selected, that covered all types of questions described by Patton (2002), specifically: demographic questions, experience questions, opinion questions, and questions of knowledge. Thus, the structure and breadth of the questionnaire included almost all the parameters, that can be processed and provide important information on the implementation of self-evaluation in Greece. In order to prepare the interviews, main axes and key questions were established and then, as the interview was developing, it was duly adjusted according to the participant (Verma & Mallick, 2004). According to Papageorgiou (1998), this method enabled the researcher to thoroughly examine the perceptions and opinions of the participants and to also understand the variables and the experiences, that have affected these perceptions. Then, the available theory was combined to interpret them, in terms of self-evaluation, from their own viewpoint, and in the particular socio-historical frame they were in (Kyriazis, 2004).

Therefore, in April and May 2017, 20 interviews were organized. The analysis of the research material collected was done by the method of content analysis (Verma, Mallick, 2004). This technique examined the existence and frequency

of important elements appearance that were related to the subject (Vamboukas, 1998). The researcher studied carefully the information gathered, in order to deeply understand the teachers' views and to be able to share the information into sections (i.e., Braun & Clarke, 2006: 77-101). First, the conceptual definitions of the interview questions based on the 4 thematic axes had been encoded to functional definitions and a code table was created (table 1). Once, the contact information data (answers given) were collected, they were encoded, according to the conceptual definitions framework that follows below. All this process was based on the qualitative content analysis method of Miles and Huberman (1994). Particularly, the researcher coded to functional definitions the phrases and the words of the interviews, expressing specific meanings, and categorized them into respective codes and thematic categories examined. Furthermore, she divided similar conceptual definitions of the coded answers, into sections and subsections, according to the research questions (Brown, 2001). Some initial codes formed main themes, while other sub-themes. Themes thickened groups of codes or categories and contained a higher degree interpretation, from the most descriptive codes or categories (Langdrige, 2004).

Table 1

1st Axis Introductory questions	
Participation in the process of the 2014 school unit self-evaluation	PPRSUS-E2014
Work experience	WE
2nd Axis Definition and importance of school self-evaluation	
Definition of school self-evaluation	DSS-E
Significance/Importance of school self-evaluation	S/ISS-E
Factors of a negative school self-evaluation	FNSS-E
3rd Axis Dimensions of self-evaluation of leadership members and teachers	
Dimensions of self-evaluation	DS-E
Leadership evaluation	LE
Administration evaluation	AE
Quality evaluation of work patterns	QEW P
Quality evaluation of behaviour patterns	QEBP
Evaluation of school unit relationships with the department of primary school education	ESURSPSE
Assessment of daily practice	ADP
Assessment of teacher's absences	ATA
Assessment of teaching practices	ATP
Class harmony assessment	CHA
Assessment of pupils	AP
Assessment of building infrastructure, equipment, materials and financing	ABIEMF
Assessment of school relationships with parents	ASRP

Regarding, sample selection, key parameters were: rich data from fewer people (Morse, 1994; Robson, 2007), time and financial resources, and the use of findings (i.e., Patton, 2002: 244). Consequently, a combination of mixed purposeful sampling was used for sample selection. This mode helped significantly to identify cases that have the potential to provide the maximum information about the subject of the research and to offer a thorough and in-depth study (Marshall, 1996; Mason, 2009). The research design remained flexible in the sampling phase. Thus, the findings produced led to revisions of some initial choices (Coyne, 1997; Christou, 1999; Lyons & Branston, 2006; Mason, 2009). The whole process was completed, when collection of new information was over and the concepts already mentioned, reappeared (Kallinikaki, 2010).

As a result, the characteristics of the final sample, that responded adequately to the research questions (i.e., Marshall, 1996: 523), are the following:

The participants in this research were 20. Of these, 19 were women and 1 man. They were all preschool teachers, who worked in various Public Preschool Education schools, dispersed in the large administrative district of Primary Education of Eastern Thessaloniki, with more than 10 years of work experience. All but one, participated in the process of self-evaluation of Greek school units, in 2014. Most of them were graduates of four-year Pre-School University Departments in Pedagogics Faculties. The rest were graduates of two-year Pre-School Courses and had completed the process of simulation for their degrees at University Faculties. Many of them were also owners of master degrees, two-year post-training 'Didaskalio' certificates, as well as foreign languages and computer certifications.

During the interview, the researcher informed all participants that all ethical rules would be respected and that their personal data would remain confidential. She also told them, that their participation in the survey was not obligatory and that they could leave, if they felt like it. She clarified the purpose of the research (Bell, 1997), and ensured that the duration of the interview would not tire them out. At the same time, she made certain, she was objective and impartial of all her personal opinions and values and was opened to all the answers, without judging whether they were socially acceptable or not (Mason 2009).

Researcher's priority was to ensure the quality and the validity of the research. She tried to describe it honestly, analytically and accurately. Continuing, the given interpretations were strictly based on the participants' statements (Mulholland, Wallace, 2003), combined with the existing bibliography, making tripartite intersections of sources, methods, and theories. Dependability, confirmability, and triangulation enhanced the ability of its transferability and generability (Guba, 1994; Lincoln, 1994).

5 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis of the results showed the following:

All participants except one participated in the mandatory self-evaluation process.

The first set of questions, that attempted to give answers to the first research question, concerned the definition and

significance of self-evaluation. The overwhelming majority of participants gave the right definition, covering all respective dimensions and involved parties. However, some interviewees claimed that they had no information, and that was the reason, their school did not participate in the 2014 self-evaluation, while some others said that they had incomplete information.

They also recognized its importance, as it helps in locating positive and negative aspects of a school unit. Those findings agree with the findings of other researches (Harris, 2000, Holly & Hopkins, 1988, Hopkins, 2001, International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, 1996), which support, that school self-evaluation is particularly important, since it can serve various purposes at the same time, especially through highlighting strengths and weaknesses. In addition, schools are rendered responsible for the use of their resources, their program implementation and their project accomplishment (Macnab, 2004). However, some of them pointed out that self-evaluation should always be implemented and teachers themselves should have agreed to this process (Christou & Sigala, 2001). Ultimately, true qualitative improvement in a school unit can be attained through the exploitation of its internal functions and structures (i.e., Stoll, 1999:115-127). But, there was also the view that self-evaluation is not necessary because the teacher will do his job as he thinks anyway.

Subsequently, the interviewees in the second research question, claimed that basic points of a school self-evaluation are: clear purposes, responsible and organized implementation and objectivity of judgments. However, they pointed out some negative factors, that pose serious obstacles to the positive experience of self-evaluation. These are: stress, enforcement of procedure, lack of objectivity and disconnection of self-evaluation process and results, from its appropriate purposes and future planning. As Macbeath (2001) claims, an effective school self-evaluation puts its results into optimal use, having as main target the improvement of its provided school services. Then, it proceeds with the necessary changes, keeping always in mind teachers' opinions. Of course, there are defined priorities, aims, timetables, as well as designated measures for tackling the various issue, that may arise. In addition, it identifies the people responsible for the actions, the timetables and the support needed, provides the details of how, when, and by whom the progress of the process will be monitored and evaluated and above all, ensures the clear standards under which the school unit will be evaluated.

Further on, the third set of questions tried to answer the third research question, which referred to leadership's and teachers' self-evaluation dimensions. The participants managed to delineate all the dimensions of school self-evaluation, covering sectors such as, practices, logistics infrastructure and equipment, leadership and management, teaching methods and teachers' further training. As far as leadership and management dimensions are concerned, they contributed to various evaluative sectors such as, school environment and culture, teachers' further training, relationships among school managers, teacher, parents, children etc. Of course, it was noted, that since there are one-class, two-classes or three-classes kindergartens and the

staff ranged from one to a few, there is no essential leadership.

Continuing, in school administration dimensions, they almost located all the aspects that must be assessed, like regulation, working hours, teaching plan, recourse exploitation, communication qualities, and management knowledge. They emphasized the necessity of clear and objective working standards, taking into account each class' particularities, personalized needs, and diversity recourse. They also claimed, that if there is no clear behavior pattern and no common comparison measure, it is very difficult to objectively estimate human behavior. They also focused on the relationship between the Primary Education Department and each school as a unit, giving solutions to emerged problems and creating and supporting innovative programs. They also believed that each class's particularities, program flexibility, and teacher's daily preparation should taken into account in the assessment of day-to-day practice. They still pointed out, that unjustified absence should be evaluated, but not justified one, due to illness, strike or other serious reasons. There were various views on the assessment of teaching practices. Most of them felt, that they should definitely be evaluated according to the aims and the pedagogical methods used, but there is great difficulty in finding a common assessment measure. A few of them said,, that only innovative pedagogical approaches should be evaluated. The majority of participants agreed, that the classroom harmony and eurythmy should be evaluated according to specific case circumstances, along with children's and parents' particularities. They all agreed, that students should be assessed. Still, opinions varied concerning the frequency and the assessment mode: every day, every trimester, worksheet form, child's individual file. Almost all teachers gave particular emphasis on the assessment of building infrastructure, technical equipment, and educational resources, as they work in an auxiliary way for the educational project. All of them considered, that the relationship between teachers and parents should be evaluated, putting emphasis on cooperation and communication. These findings are in line with those of Valachis et al. (2008, 2009), Vogrinc et al. (2009), Marston and Watts (2003) and Agalianos et al. (2006:241–267), who concluded, that the school self-evaluation covers different dimensions, as it focuses on students, teachers and on school as an institution, while acknowledging, that any assessment of school performance and quality, as an institution, indirectly focuses on its subsystems.

Special attention was paid to the last set of research questions that responded to the last research question and which concerned the problems and challenges associated with the implementation of self-evaluation measure. The research results have shown, that sloppiness, lack of information and lack of teachers' and evaluators' further training, linking of self-evaluation process with the purposes of the educational process, along with its punitive character and turbulent effect, can seriously threaten and destabilize the school's harmony and the educational process' harmony. The most important challenges for any possible repetition of this institution would be fear, mistrust, insecurity, lack of purposes' clarification, non-objectivity, as well as trade-union relations impacts, customer-union relations impacts,

which weaken the institutional prestige and inevitably lead the whole process to failure. The findings of this research agree with those of similar researches on self-evaluation in Greece. Fear, stress, and mistrust are teachers' dominant sentiments (i.e., Galariniotis, Kasidou 2014:114-126). The majority of teachers are dissatisfied with their mandatory involvement in the self-evaluation process and the lack of their regular updating about it. Teachers' vast majority are afraid of correlating school self-evaluation with teacher evaluation, loss of professional rights and manipulation of their personalities. (i.e., Dialectopoulos, 2015: 713 -725). The goal is twofold: the subversion of work relations and professional rights, as well as the ideological subordination of teachers. (i.e., Kavadias, 2002: 178, Kavvadias and Tsirigotis, 1997: 31).

The above results showed that although the majority of the teachers accepted the significance of self- evaluation for the school improvement and the important parameters for its success, they felt very insecure in case of its implementation. The reasons that provoked this insecurity appeared clearly to the answers that responded the last set of research questions.

6 CONCLUSIONS – PROPOSALS

In conclusion, it can be said, that this research has shown, that self-evaluation helps schools achieve true and lasting improvement, clearly facilitating them, to simultaneously meet their needs and enhance their potential. However, coping with this challenge requires of educational policy-makers, to have a well-thought-out design, so as to promote self-evaluation,. This project should ensure, that teachers are properly informed about the process and the methodology, cultivating a positive attitude towards it, improving their educational work and professional development, removing their fears, suspicions, and insecurity. Furthermore, teachers should be trained on the methodology, the tools and the self-evaluation practices so that they can apply them adequately and consistently. Through self-evaluation, teachers' clear and updated views of their own strengths and weaknesses along with their suggestions for appropriate strategies render progress possible in the field of education (i.e., Macbeath, 2011, p.109).

According to the British National Union of Teachers (NUT), teachers support self-evaluation, when their own needs and agendas are supported rather than those of School Supervision (NUT, 2005). The degree of success of this particular process in a certain school, depends on mutual support, trust, openness, and cooperation among teachers (i.e., Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992: Vanhoof, Van Petegem, Verhoeven, & Buvens, 2009: 667–686). In addition, clarifying the scope of its application and ensuring transparency and meritocracy for the use of the emerging results, constitute crucial factors for the success of the referred institution. Finally, self-evaluation should lead to teacher's increase personal confidence and professional expertise (Mac Beath, 2011). The success of this process in a school depends on mutual support, trust and cooperation among teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992 : Vanhoof, Van Petegem, Verhoeven, & Buvens, 2009). Those who undertake the development of the self-evaluation process

should provide a detailed understanding of its context at all hierarchy levels starting from central administration and ending to school unit. A feasible approach would be to develop a support framework to differentiate school self-evaluation, tailored to the needs of each school, instead of promoting an established programme or intervention.

In conclusion, it could be said that the present research, by carrying out a detailed analysis of the questionnaire, has succeeded satisfactorily in investigating the questions raised from the outset.

Researcher's theoretical background has contributed to the success of the whole process, significantly aiding the information collection as well its qualitative analysis and interpretation (Tzouma, 2006 ; Willig, 2008).

The differentiation of this research from other similar ones lies in the fact that it detected exclusively and in-depth the perceptions of pre-school education teachers working in public preschool education, which is included in the compulsory primary education that exclusively belongs to the Greek Ministry of Education (as opposed to nursery schools that belong to the Greek Ministry of Internal Affairs). In this respect, the research at hand presents a rear attempt to tackle the thorny issue of self-evaluation at the level of preschool education. As a result, important information emerged, which was added to the available theory for this particular institution and completed the respective educational framework. Decision makers can also use this information, to organize an effective promotion plan concerning self-evaluation

On the other hand, this research tool hardly allows the utilization of a large scale sample. So, the sample was limited quantitatively and geographically. There should be pan-Hellenic evidence from all the geographic points of Greece, which lead to absolutely safe and valid conclusions. Therefore, a variety of information is required, in order for self-evaluation to be effectively designed and implemented. As a logical consequence, it was considered necessary to carry out further quantitative and qualitative researches on teachers from different levels of education, with different capabilities, qualifications and opinions, all over the country, for obtaining relevant enlightening data and figures. Those researches should explore all areas of self-evaluation, its implementation difficulties, as well as the particularities and peculiarities of Hellenic Educational System. Thus, considering and taking into account the wide-ranging elements and conclusions, that will be derived, it is possible to carry out a scientifically integrated program of promotion and implementation, that will be able to ensure its successful realization, which will contribute significantly to the improvement of the quality of the general educational project.

Summarizing this study, it is noteworthy, that school self-evaluation can be a very useful tool in teachers' hands -for their professional development and in leaders' hands for the overall school improvement. However, for the successful actualization of the above institution, there should be the following necessary conditions: clear objectives, process transparency, good planning, information flow, consistency and accountability.

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